

Reading Together

BY KRISTEN LINDBECK

While many books can tell us the facts “about” Judaism and Islam, we can learn some deep truths “from” these Abrahamic traditions by engaging in Scriptural Reasoning, a still developing movement that offers a fresh form of interfaith dialogue and scripture study. In SR, we may broach even the hard issues among these faiths in an atmosphere of friendship, humility, and mutual respect.

While teaching a course on world religions at a church-related college last year, I asked my students what they knew about Islam before reading the textbook. One reported that some Muslims were terrorists. “Did you know anything else about Islam?” I asked. Nearly all of them shook their heads, some looking slightly sheepish. As the semester continued, my students were fascinated to learn about the clear historical and theological connections among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, connections never discussed in the mainstream American media.

My first experience of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) in the late 1990s was a bit like that of my students. Of course I already knew that Islam is a rich monotheist tradition with historical ties to Judaism and Christianity. I was taken by surprise, however, by Islam’s reverence for Jesus as a prophet and the many Biblical stories that appear in the Qur’an. Even more, I was fascinated by what Islam had to teach me, not in matters of doctrine, but in philosophy and worldview. Islam provided a new lens through which to see God—not only as omnipotent Creator and Judge, but also as the Merciful Fount of Mercy, and the Friend who is nearer than my heartbeat. Islam’s view of humanity has also enriched my own: though “Islam” means “submission” and emphasizes our role as servants of God, it also stresses

that we are God's "vice-regents" on earth, the noble stewards of creation.

While many books on Islam could tell me the facts *about* the religion, I've learned some deep truths *from* Islam by engaging in Scriptural Reasoning, a still developing movement that offers a fresh form of interfaith dialogue and a new—and renewed—kind of scripture study. Scriptural Reasoning hopes to be a redeeming force in this world. In my experience, it already is such a force in a modest way, and has the potential to do more.

A DIFFERENT DIALOGUE IN THE COMMUNITY

Community-based interfaith dialogue often involves "making nice" — instructing one another in the basic elements of the faiths involved, stressing commonalities, and agreeing how wonderful it is that we share basic moral values. This kind of dialogue is valuable, indeed essential, as a beginning. Particularly in the wake of 9/11 and our war in Iraq, Christians need to know Islam is not defined by terrorism and violence, and Muslims need to know Christianity is not defined by self-righteous crusade. Both Christians and Muslims perennially need reminding that Judaism is not a static and legalistic faith, but one of dynamic thinking and inspiring ideals.

Yet this kind of dialogue is self-limiting. While it is crucial for us to see the human face of people of other faiths and to understand that they share most ethical values and many religious concepts, this only takes a few hour-long meetings. The next step might be intensive study of another faith, but this takes more time than is available to most working religious leaders, teachers, mothers, doctors, and business people. After all, we want to study our own traditions too!

Furthermore, the kind of dialogue that looks only for commonalities leaves the important and often painful questions among faiths entirely unaddressed. Many Christians wonder if Muslims are saved, or are certain that they are not. Muslims are often taught that the doctrine of the Trinity is a polytheist corruption of the true faith of the prophet Jesus. Other questions—about sexual ethics, the role of faith in politics, and the place of religion in businesses or schools—have created divisions within faiths as well as among them. Do we trust the people from other faith communities enough to frankly discuss such issues in their presence? Usually not.

How can Scriptural Reasoning address these issues? In SR people of the three Abrahamic traditions read scripture together, which enables them to deepen their understanding of other faiths in focused, manageable study sessions. The encounter with scripture also ensures that participants are looking together at something beyond personal opinion, and thus can avoid platitude and superficiality. Even more important, in SR people begin and end dialogue with a prayer, which reminds participants that in the presence of revealed scripture we are also in the presence of the Revealer. An awareness of God's presence—perhaps I dare say simply "God's presence"—leaves us open to unexpected gifts of light.

Though we have not witnessed any “Paul on the road to Damascus” type of religious experiences in Scriptural Reasoning, I and others often remark on the surprising intellectual and spiritual insights we gain from the process, sometimes from others and sometimes from our own unexpected words. After participants in SR have experienced on-going trust for weeks or months, they can broach even the hard issues between and within their faiths in an atmosphere of friendship, humility, and mutual respect.

A DIFFERENT DIALOGUE IN THE ACADEMY

Academic interfaith dialogue has the benefits of increasing knowledge of and respect for other faiths, but it also has its own limitations, which Scriptural Reasoning is well-fitted to address. Basit Koshul, a Muslim philosopher, expresses these limitations well. I met him when we were graduate students in one of the first Scriptural Reasoning groups. The group, which met at Drew University, a Methodist school, was started by Peter Ochs, a Jewish philosopher who is one of the founders of Scriptural Reasoning. At first Koshul was reluctant to participate in Scriptural Reasoning, despite an invitation from Peter Ochs, his teacher. At one point in his intellectual development, he had consciously avoided interfaith forums. “Past experience,” writes Koshul, “taught me that most forums were basically ‘interfaith-less’ forums where agnostic Muslims, Christians, and Jews met to basically confirm each others’ agnosticism.” However, when he joined the SR group, he says:

It was not long before I discovered, to my elation, that this particular “interfaith” forum was unlike any other that I had known. The unique character of this forum was due to the three fundamental presuppositions on which it was based: (1) each of the three traditions confidently asserts its claims to uniqueness, as well as universality; (2) at the same time it does not view this claim as being an obstacle to genuine dialogue; because (3) this dialogue is centered on the Revealed Text.¹

In other words, the same emphasis on scripture and its Revealer that works for community-centered Scriptural Reasoning works for academic SR too. Instead of promoting an intellectualized version of “making nice,” SR fosters an environment in which participants can present the power and beauty of their own faiths without apology, and without proselytizing or fear of being accused of proselytizing. Participants in SR may or may not seek to spread their faiths outside of its context, but SR is fundamentally about listening as much as asserting one’s own truth. Each faith community “confidently asserts its claims to uniqueness,” then listens to others and to the Revealer behind the Bible and the Qur’an.

In an SR study group at the 2004 American Academy of Religion meeting, several participants tried to define SR and arrived at the following

ideas: Scriptural Reasoning exists in the “between” –between faiths and between faith and the university; SR is a way of loving God continually with people of other faiths; SR is a way of continually giving and receiving hospitality. Furthermore, SR means risking embarrassment, or provoking anger in the other, or exposing an intimate place in one’s faith.² Most of the scholars doing SR are professional theologians and philosophers of religion, but in SR they are willing to put themselves on the line as believers in ways that theologians and philosophers usually avoid.

THE VALUE OF THREE-WAY CONVERSATION

Scriptural Reasoning can foster a unique intellectual and spiritual intimacy because it is a conversation among three Abrahamic traditions; it is not limited to just two faiths, and is not open to all world religions. Just as an understanding friend can inject necessary perspective into a difference of opinion between spouses or siblings, the presence of a third faith adds perspective and opens up the dialogue among traditions that share a long and often tragic history. These three faiths inform one another in overlapping ways: Christianity and Islam are proselytizing majority religions; Judaism and Islam are strongly parallel in their understanding of God’s Oneness; Christianity and Judaism have longer experience with the challenges of modern society, modern science, and the separation of church and state.³

Scriptural Reasoning can include more of the full spectrum of each faith, from liberal to conservative, than usually occurs in general interfaith conversations. To engage in

SR, one need only believe that Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same God. Some participants in SR are universalistic in their understanding of God’s work in the world, and some are not. Scriptural Reasoning accepts that it is natural and often appropriate for each faith to understand the others in its own terms: for many Muslims to

understand the Jewish and Christian revelations as precursors to the revelation of Islam; for many Christians to understand all salvation, even that of non-Christians, as mediated by Christ; and for many Jews to understand Christianity and Islam as worship of the God of Israel by the nations of the world. Participants in SR need not give up a belief that their faith among the three has the truest understanding of God’s will; all that is required is

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openness to the idea that God cannot be limited by human understandings of truth. This is the more inclusive end of the traditional range of belief in Islam and Judaism, and is also held by many Christians today. The question of whether God speaks in traditions which have no personal God (like much of Buddhism) or many personal gods (like much of Hinduism) is more difficult and divisive for the Abrahamic traditions.

How does Scriptural Reasoning work? While there is no simple recipe, the three things that seem crucial for SR are keeping the focus on scripture, engaging in small-group discussion, and providing time for spontaneous exploration.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam speak related religious languages. They all tell of a personal God who creates, reveals, and saves, and traditionally teach the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and God's coming kingdom on earth. In speaking of the ethical meaning of a passage, for example, they can all draw on the Biblical and Qur'anic ethics of com-

mandment, sin, repentance, and gracious Divine forgiveness. The language of creation in the Divine image, and of the fall, is also common to the three faiths, though often understood quite differently. They do not agree on all points, but they share a basis on which to begin discussion.

EXPLORING SCRIPTURE TOGETHER

So, exactly *how* does Scriptural Reasoning work? Is there an easily definable technique that opens the way to fruitful dialogue? While there is no simple recipe, three things that seem crucial for SR are keeping the focus on scripture, engaging in small-group discussion, and providing time for spontaneous exploration.

In the academic SR group at Drew University, for instance, one person took responsibility for introducing a focal passage of scripture by explaining its context and traditional interpretation within a particular faith, especially if it was from the Qur'an. We divided into groups of four to eight people to discuss the passage, and then came back together for a wider discussion. Michael Cartwright describes a community-centered group he and others founded at the University of Indianapolis: they recruited fifteen members (five from each of the three faith communities), decided on scriptural texts, and discussed them together.⁴ In the scholarly American Academy of Religion annual meeting, members of the three faiths present written papers which we discuss in large and small group settings. Later the authors post their papers on the web site of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning and ask for written responses.

Scriptural Reasoning groups operate with some shared postulates about scripture. The most important of these is that because scripture is revealed by an Eternal God, it is open-ended. God is still speaking to us in the text. On this account, the traditional, “doctrinally correct” readings of scripture are not the last word, but rather a jumping-off point. Furthermore, one gift that SR can bring to the study of scripture is recognition that there is a fascinating diversity of interpretation, even within the doctrinal orthodoxy of one faith. Augustine, with his fondness for allegory, did not read scripture like Calvin; and neither of them read scripture just like a twentieth-century conservative or twentieth-century liberal church member. The mystic poet Rumi did not read like the great Arab philosophers, and neither read the Qur’an just like modern Muslims, whether liberals or conservatives. In a comparable way, SR treats historical theories about the original meaning of the text as a starting point, not as the last word about the “real meaning.” This all becomes even more complicated in an interfaith context. The Qur’an, for example, asserts that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary as a miracle of God, and yet adamantly denies that he is God’s Son.⁵

Yet Scriptural Reasoning is not relativistic; participants explore and listen to scripture, ask questions of others, and look within themselves and their own faiths. Imagine with me a community-based SR discussion on the Qur’anic passage in question. A Christian participant might remark how surprising it is that Muslims believe in the Virgin Birth while so many Christians do not. Another participant, Jewish or Christian, might ask the Muslim presenter why Muhammad, the final prophet in Islam, has no special birth story, while Jesus does. Muslims in the group would propose their best understandings, which might be traditional or newly constructed in the context of their knowledge of their faith, or both. A Jewish participant might then remark that the Muslim view of Jesus as a prophet is similar to that of many liberal Jews today, and unlike the traditional Jewish view, which is far more negative. Then a Muslim might return to the question of why so many Christians doubt the Virgin Birth, as it is clearly stated in the Gospels. Christians would attempt to answer. At this point the group might return to a closer reading of the passage; move on to a discussion of competing views of revelation and the truth of scripture in Christianity; or continue with a comparison of the Annunciation scenes in Luke and the Qur’an. Finally, they would end with a prayer, and each person would go home with a renewed understanding of his or her faith as unique, and yet connected to the other Abrahamic faiths by agreements, disagreements, and shared questions.

THE PROMISE OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING

Peter Ochs sees Scriptural Reasoning as a redemptive practice that can help to heal the suffering of the modern world, especially the distress caused by the empty conflict between rationalist intellectuals and a large

number of believers.⁶ The rationalist Enlightenment, Ochs says, rightly rejected Renaissance witch burnings, Protestant wars of religion, and Catholic inquisitions. America's founding fathers, who were heirs of the Enlightenment, rightly proposed the separation of church and state. Yet their nineteenth- and twentieth-century followers encouraged the more debatable separation of religion from politics and they harmfully demoted faith to a purely private matter, divorced from public ethics, education, social justice, and economics. This rupture has created suffering—and thereby challenged rationalism's claims to truth. Scriptural Reasoning reminds us that scripture inspired much of the best thinking behind the Enlightenment (remember "All men are created equal"?). Furthermore, scripture contains rules for thinking that can repair the emptiness of a society built on rationalism, individualism, and materialism. SR is a way of listening to scripture which puts God's will back into biblical scholarship and philosophy, and eventually, ideally, back into the public discourse of society in an open-minded, open-ended way.

Scriptural Reasoning poses a similar challenge to believers when we criticize modern society for "taking away our belief in truth." Is our belief so nebulous it can be swept away by contradiction, or so rigid it can be fractured by challenge? In fact, our religious speech-making often is merely a reaction to the anti-religiousness of much of the world's establishment, not a thoughtful response to the world's suffering. Sadly, both liberal and conservative believers tend to look to scripture for the kind of truth that scores points, rather than the kind of truth that changes lives. SR holds that scriptural truths are dynamic and life-giving, paradoxical and difficult, like the truths of Jesus' parables.⁷ They are not upheld by carving the Ten Commandments in stone and setting them in a court house. They are upheld by humbly and intelligently exploring the meanings within the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Five Pillars of Islam, writing them in our hearts, as it were, and being shaped in our actions by them.

CONCLUSION

Isra Yazicioglu, a young Turkish graduate student with a pleasant face and warm smile—she wears a headscarf and a long coat, so she appears distinctively Muslim—relates to me a beautiful example of Scriptural Reasoning that occurred when she and William Young, a Christian professor, led a SR workshop in Boston on Martin Luther King Day, 2004.

Ms. Yazicioglu believes SR is grounded in two "reasonable hopes." One is that whoever ordered this world and created us in it will speak to us through clear channels. In other words, it is reasonable to expect that whoever is speaking to us through creation will also address us in a more direct way through revelation. The second reasonable hope is that the Divine address will not overwhelm us, but will speak to our human condition and not contradict human reason and experience. These hopes—which are

neither dogmatic convictions that shun reason *nor* dogmatic rejections of even the possibility of Divine speech—are the basis of Scriptural Reasoning.

She notes that Martin Luther King was a scriptural reasoner in his famous letter from the Birmingham Jail. *He looked to scripture for guidance*, for his insistence on non-violence came from his faithfulness to the message of the gospels. Even though the circumstances were not improving as he hoped, he did not give way to violence. Yet *he was reasoning with the scripture*, for he was reasonably expecting it to speak to his circumstances. He was justifiably expecting that the scriptures could neither endorse racism nor call him to be indifferent to injustice.

I find it hard to imagine a better witness than Ms. Yazicioglu's words. They witness to Christian and to Muslim truths, to King's lasting message, and to the potential for Scriptural Reasoning to bring people together in the truth.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Church, synagogue, and mosque communities will find helpful suggestions about designing scriptural study groups at the Children of Abraham Institute (CHAI) website, www.people.virginia.edu/~pwo3v/chai/pages/communityintro.html. Many will enjoy the welcoming give-and-take within the Journal of Scriptural Reasoning at etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/.

NOTES

1 Basit Koshul, "The Semiotics of *Ayah*: An Introduction to Qur'anic Scriptural Reasoning," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, 2:1 (May, 2002). Available online at etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr (accessed February 7, 2005).

2 Among the people I paraphrase are David Ford (Cambridge University), Kevin Hughes (Villanova University), and Steven Kepnes (Colgate University).

3 The last point is made by Koshul, "The Semiotics of *Ayah*."

4 Michael Cartwright, "Gathering at the Table for Scripture Study: A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue about Jonah Texts," (February 15, 2003). Available online at www.people.virginia.edu/~pwo3v/chai/pages/cartwright.htm (accessed February 7, 2005).

5 Surah 19, "Mary." Available online in three parallel English translations at www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/019.qmt.html (accessed February 8, 2005).

6 Peter Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, 2:1 (May 2002).

7 Ibid.



KRISTEN LINDBECK

is Visiting Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible and Rabbinics at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and a board member of the National Society of Scriptural Reasoning.